



**Greg Hainge, Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013, 296 pp.**

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**Book Review:**

Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2013, 296 pp.

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Studies of noise are now increasingly called on to respond to the noisy music and visuals that define contemporary aural and visual culture. A valuable contributor to such studies is Greg Hainge, professor at University of Queensland, Australia, who now has published a full book on the subject. However, *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise*, as the subtitle indicates, probes beyond the proliferating aesthetic uses of noise, in search of a more primordial conception of noise, where noise, nausea and chaos appear to be intimately linked. This conception of noise, which appears as much like an anti-epistemology, concerned with the repression of multiplicities grounding knowledge production, as an ontology in its own right, draws its main inspiration from the French philosopher Michel Serres. Hainge conducts a balancing act between conflicting notions of noise, between common sense notions of noise characterizing many of his examples and the primordial Serrean notion of noise, but the balance gravitates fundamentally in favour of the latter: an exploration of noise as an opening towards multiple potentialities, the non-reductive, and the chaotic richness of matter(s) that meaning, closure and order tend to suppress. This balancing act, which fundamentally sways in the direction of a search for a primordial ontology of noise, is both impressive in its scope and intriguing in its complexity.

Thus, after bringing us “towards an ontology of noise” in his introduction (p. 11), Hainge treats us to eight case driven chapters. These are, respectively; on the lack of noise in the presumptive noise music of Luigi Russolo and John Cage; the presence of noise in Jean Paul Sartre’s novel *Nausea*; the noisy cinematic horror of *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski 2002); the noise of a font remediated from a vintage typewriter; the implicit noise theorizing in Roland Barthes’s work on photography and on the grain of the voice; the noise of David Lynch’s films *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Inland Empire* (2006); the noisy photography of Thomas Ruff, and lastly; the all-encompassing musical noise of Merzbau.

Hainge’s ambitious study provides us with a number of intriguing discussions and perceptive analysis of the works he deals with. But he carefully avoids pinning down and analysing his main term, “noise”, as to its ontology and tends instead to multiply its meanings. This allows him to see noise in more places than most of us, but according to shifting and more or less implicit definitions of what noise is. The common sense definition of noise, which may be conceived as inharmonious sound or disturbance, respectively, does not interest Hainge much, although it is allowed to carry his fine analysis of the vintage font “Moms Typewriter” in chapter four, and keeps emerging throughout the study. As noted, Hainge is more concerned with a conception of noise in which the term noise comes close to operating as a metaphor for a primordial chaotic disorder, although such a bold characterization risks making itself guilty of precisely the reductionist conceptions both Hainge and Serres so fervently resist.

The question of what noise is then, works as a driver through Hainge’s book, but paradoxically, at the same time, it is the question he constantly shies away from interrogating. He seems to prefer brushing us up against it in various ways. Thus, in the conclusion he writes that “even if I have

attempted here to sketch an ontology of noise, I have...always been aware that noise would remain out of reach in some way, that we would only be able to move towards it” (p. 273). Hainge defends this result by writing that “if the ontology of noise is relational, as has been suggested, then it can never be pinned down to one definitive thing, its points and coordinates will never remain fixed, able to be mapped...and will never allow us to believe that we have definitely, once and for all contained it” (ibid.).

The informational conception of noise, in which noise is conceived as disturbance, is relational in the sense that noise is always noisy relative to someone trying to perceive something else. To the listener who enjoys Beethoven on a vinyl record, the sound of cracks on the vinyl is noise. But to a listener who enjoys Portishead on a CD, such vinyl noise is not anymore noise, but part of the music, because Portishead uses medium specific noise from vinyl records extensively in their music. The latter kind of noise, however, which becomes aesthetically controlled, tends not to qualify as noise for Hainge, as it surrenders its obstinate unruly multiplicity in favour of meaning, closure and order. Thus, following this logic, in his first chapter he provocatively dismisses what has been thought of as noise music from Luigi Russolo and John Cage, as their aesthetic control does not allow for the more primordial noise Hainge is seeking. Hainge basically concludes that noise co-opted by artists for expressive means ceases to be noise. This important conceptual choice allows him to aim for the more fundamental, but also slippery, notion of noise he inherits from Serres. The choice not only writes off the relevance of Russolo and Cage. It also risks writing off the substantial contemporary interest in using noise as an aesthetic device, for example in glitch music. By abstaining from truly engaging with such contemporary noise aesthetics, Hainge can concentrate his resources on the more primordial ontological noise his book first of all aims to elucidate.

Moving to the realm of literature, Hainge finds Antoine Roquentin, Sartre’s main character in *Nausea*, a historian filled with existential angst and plagued by strong attacks of pain, despair and nausea. Bringing his character towards the abyss of existence helps Sartre articulate his existentialist path to freedom. Hainge finds in Roquentin an authentic confrontation with noise on a primordial level, a noise which in its radical opening toward chaos, dissolves order and induces nausea. Roquentin’s existential angst and nausea becomes a reference throughout Hainge’s book, pointing to the disturbing, but fundamentally rewarding, confrontation with noise as alterity and productive potentiality.

Hainge lets the horror film continue the theme of alterity and chaos disrupting ordered lives. After a compelling discussion of noisy typography and an interrogation into implicit theorizing of noise by Barthes, Hainge moves further into the abyss of noise through perceptive readings of Lynch’s *Erasorhead* and the enigmatic *Inland Empire*. The opening line of *Inland Empire*, heard through vinyl static, appears to be a radio announcer who says: “Axoon N, the longest running radio play in history, tonight, continuing in the Baltic region, a grey winter day in an old hotel” (p. 187). Hainge notes: “In many respects, this opening line of the film is in many ways also nothing but noise, for it confounds so many different things, remains so ambiguous, resists meaning and comprehension on so many levels” (p. 188). Thus, Hainge finds not only the common sense notion of noise operating here, but also the primordial, which obstinately prevents closure, meaning and order. It is such examples, when noise according to a conventional definition, also carries within it a clear negation of meaning, closure and order, that it is redeemed within Hainge’s conception.

Beyond bringing us towards an ontology of noise, Hainge also wants to offer a contribution to our conception of the ontology of photography through a reading of Thomas Ruff's noisy images and a critique of Roland Barthes and André Bazin for their realist bent, their underestimation of the complexity of the photographic process and the conventional aspects it involves. The critique of Barthes and Bazin has some warrant, but Hainge undermines his criticism by rather coarsely assigning to Bazin a belief in an "absolute objectivity," an expression he does not care to explain (p. 226). Hainge's claim that the concept of indexicality in photographic theory is misleading is also poorly substantiated, and no alternative conception of the causal factor operating in photographic media, by which they make visible evidence possible, is offered.

Given Hainge's interest in matters which ordered conceptions tend to repress, it is only logical that he takes an interest in Barthes' efforts to conceptualize alterity through notions like "the third meaning,"<sup>1</sup> "punctum,"<sup>2</sup> and "the grain of the voice."<sup>3</sup> Hainge is also a very perceptive reader of Barthes, as he is of French theorists and philosophers in general, but as with Bazin he also at times lacks some charity. He quotes Barthes' observation from "The Grain of the Voice" that he seems "only to hear the lungs, never the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucous membranes, the nose", when listening to Fischer-Dieskau (p. 154). "It is simply...not possible for a vocal expression to be produced without the tongue, the glottis, the teeth or the nose," Hainge counters (p. 156), and he continues: "The problem...to phrase it in the terminology of information theory, is that in pretending that this is the case, an ontological claim is made about an expression emitted on the sole basis of the signal received..." (ibid.). Hainge concludes that Barthes confuses "a subjective and aesthetic claim with an ontological one," but he fails to make it evident that Barthes in his essay has indeed made the ontological claim Hainge ascribes to him (pp. 165-7). Thus, it appears as likely that it is Hainge who comes to confuse an "aesthetic claim with an ontological one".

Undefinable, multiple and beyond what words can grasp, noise stands unconquered at the end of Hainge's book, more evoked and approached than interrogated, but thereby also protected from any reductionist conception. Hainge suggests that "through noise...we are able to intuit the serial relations that link the heterogenetic modes through which everything comes to be in an ontology that does not believe in fixed identities, beings and transcendent essence, but only difference, becomings and relations. If noise inhabits everything because everything is in actuality formed out of noise, then what noise ultimately points us to is the relational ontology according to which the world comes to pass..." (p. 14).

Readers interested in the operational powers of medium specific and other forms of noise used aesthetically, may regret Hainge's partial dismissal of this as noise, but in return Hainge offers a compelling, ambitious and contemporary pursuit of a conception of noise inherited from Serres, applied to a series of works explored in perceptive readings.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image, Music, Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977).

